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IN CONVERSATION WITH
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When did you know you would be an artist?

I don't know if there was a specific moment when I realized I would be an artist - but I think it was more of a realization of what I didn't want to do. I worked in and out of many different fields including science, fashion design, and commercial surface/textile design, before arriving at painting.

For a long time I was living in auto-pilot, not really thinking for myself and mainly doing what others around me were doing, or doing what I was told to do. I got into a serious car accident at the end of 2013 which really shook me physically, mentally, and emotionally. It made me realize how quickly this opportunity of life can be taken away, and what a shame it would have been to not be living life for myself and for it to have potentially ended at that moment. It was a massive wake up call. I felt lost and unhappy because, up until that point, I was trying to convince myself that I was on the right path but then after the accident it's almost as if things became more clear.

After some serious introspection, I went from not really knowing if I was on the right path, to not having the courage to alter my path so I would be happier to knowing exactly what my next step would be - painting. I still didn't know what that meant, or where it would take me but I knew it was better than where I was so I just let that feeling guide me.

From that point forward I started to develop my painting practice, I was always painting on the side in my spare time as a hobby, but now I wanted to make it a priority. So everything that I did then was to support my practice - worked several part time jobs, volunteered, made a website, started to exhibit my work in small local shows and fairs, and participated in local residencies. Ultimately, I felt like I had pushed my practice as far as I could on my own and was ready to be in an environment where I could learn more about painting, be around others that were interested in art-making and also have the guidance and mentorship from professors/artists and other resources. I ended up attending the MFA program at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2017 and graduated in 2019. After I graduated with my MFA from ECUAD, I was fortunate to have some exciting opportunities come my way not too long after, I started to feel like this was something I can do, it really gave me the confidence that I needed.

What do you remember about your first artwork?

Painting, or art making, has been a significant part of my life from a young age. I can remember as a child creating something and then showing my mom, I would look forward to her reactions because she would always gasp and say “wow!” I loved that I could make something that made her smile. And for me, when painting or drawing it seemed like everything around just went quiet and nothing else mattered - I could get lost in my imagination.

The first artwork I can remember was one I made out of clay in grade 3. We were learning about claymation and were asked to make our own 2-D scene out of clay and a styrofoam plate. I was a little obsessed with Pippi Longstocking at the time so I created this scene where she was lifting her horse above her head. I got really into it and, unknowingly, ignored the teacher’s instructions to clean up and sit in a circle. I was the only student still working on their piece and the teacher came up to me, frustrated, but when she saw what I was working on she had a huge smile on her face. She took my hand and my work, stood me in front of the class and showed everyone what I made. Everyone was excited and my teacher was so proud of me. I was a pretty shy kid so I felt slightly embarrassed and uncomfortable (also I wasn’t finished working on it yet) but also happy to see their faces light up when they saw my work.

Who, what has been your biggest influence, inspiration to date?

There have been so many things that have influenced me and inspired my work as an artist: growing up in the suburbs of Brampton, Ontario, the ‘over-the-top’ Indian wedding industry, layers of textile, pattern, and colour in my mother’s clothing boutique. Also, studying biology and learning how to look at the world through a macro and micro lens, overstimulating all the senses while visiting amusement parks, the beautiful chaos of flea markets, structures of religious spaces and the ritualistic nature of various practices. Even the colour palettes of TV shows, movies, video games and toys from the 90’s, the abundance of information in ‘pop-up’ books with moving components and books like ‘I-Spy’ and “Where’s Waldo’, moving to British Columbia and the peacefulness experienced in nature, the list can go on and on.

However, I would say the biggest influences are the complexities of family dynamics and generational experiences. Within my work I reflect on the stories and seeing the first hand the experiences of the women in my family. From an early age, and as the eldest daughter in a Punjabi family, I became fixated on how cultural norms and family expectations affected my mom, aunts and grandmothers. Often times, it was very difficult for them to speak up or stand

up for themselves. Due to family and cultural pressures, they had to do what they were told and had little freedom of choice. Decisions were fuelled by expectations of gender roles, pressure to get married, upholding family honour, cultural conflicts involved with immigrating to Canada and, essentially, being in survival mode. As a result, their sense of self and place was lost, leading to a decline in mental health. There is also a lot of pressure to maintain a 'perfect' image which contributes to this decline in mental health, creating feelings of sadness, stress, depression, anxiety and suppressed anger. It's complicated because, it is also due to these cultural norms and family pressures that there is a strong sense of support within families and the community, there is always someone there that you can depend on. The experiences they went through also gave them a thick skin, often being anchors of the family. The sacrifices made by the generations of my family made me feel even stronger about pushing forward, breaking past certain patterns of behaviour and continuing to improve upon, expand upon, build upon the progress made by this line. Trying to split away from things seeming like they are going well to achieving a true sense of freedom and happiness. And through my painting practice, being able to find my voice while negotiating how to integrate my cultural roots with how I move through the contemporary world.

I'm fascinated with the concept of a façade; things seeming one way but being something completely different, or using a pleasant exterior appearance to conceal an unpleasant interior. Going back to this pressure to maintain a perfect family image, more often than not, by looking at someone you would never be able to tell what they have gone through because there is a lot of effort going into making sure these aspects of life do not show. For example, if there are marital issues, there needs to be the impression that everything is okay. Even if there is extreme conflict, you must continue to show up to events together even though you arrived separately, smile for pictures when you want to cry, cut anniversary cakes with regret, converse in social settings but not talk to each other behind closed doors and go back to the same home but into different rooms. I think a lot about how things are when no one is looking, when the masks are peeled off.

I grew up in Springdale, which is a suburban neighbourhood in Brampton, Ontario; a predominantly South Asian community. Many of the houses look the same from the outside, sort of cookie cutter homes, well maintained with little personality. But the interior, what happens inside is so vastly different and often would not reflect the relatively simple, 'perfect' exterior. Through my experiences in Brampton, I realized that there are households with nice cars, or even luxury cars, in the driveway that might actually be in major debt, or people who might adorn themselves with designer accessories and apparel but have no income, or a

couple that celebrates their marriage by having a massive 800+ person wedding event funded by another family member taking out a second mortgage, getting a loan or draining their own bank account (and their family's) to do so. All to keep up appearances and make it look like success. Of course, if you begin to peel back the layers of the motivations behind these actions it is complicated, and this also isn't the case for everyone, I'm just reflecting on my own experiences.

My interest in façades extend beyond their role of creating the illusion of a 'perfect' exterior, it can also be something that provides a temporary escape from everyday life. Every summer I would spend time with family and friends at Canada's Wonderland, an amusement park in Ontario. Immediately after entering the gates I would be overwhelmed by all the colours, smell of funnel cake and pizza, sounds of midway games, the looming rides and the crowds. It was thrilling to become completely consumed in the over-the-top experience that was so different from everyday life. I was transported to a place where everyday stresses and responsibilities melted away. Sometimes it felt like being transported to another world all together. Buildings and sections of the park created or painted to look like Medieval times, pages of a story book, a metropolitan city block or the future. Drawn into the ornate exteriors, once up close the reality of the situation sets in. Looking into the windows of these painted buildings, there is no inside, it's just an empty shell. I try to turn a doorknob and it doesn't move, it's just a prop. Materials that are made to look like brick, wood or steel are just painted plastic. These surfaces that once made me feel like I was in a different world, becomes a façade that acts as a reminder that things are not always as they seem. As I exit the park and walk through the same gates I used to enter this wonderful world, I'm in the parking lot and on my way home, back to routine.

Working closely with my mom in her Indian bridal clothing boutique, I started to think about façades and the way in which they can protect or conceal. Most of my mom's clients were women shopping for their own wedding, attending a wedding or other celebratory event. Some of these women would stay at the boutique for hours, even half the day looking at fabrics, selecting accessories, trying on outfits and figuring out which colour was the perfect colour for their complexion. Naturally this leads to lots of excited conversation about the events they were shopping for and fun things going on in their life, but eventually the conversation would get much deeper. Sharing stories about struggles, conflict and insecurities while being draped in so many beautiful, vibrant, saturated colours really stuck with me. Colour became complicated, and it made me question what it means to adorn ourselves with layers of so many bright, joyful colours. Maybe colour becomes a sort of armour that protects, deflects or

distracts from what is happening beneath these layers. Perhaps it is a mask, a veil, a tool used to convince ourselves that we are okay, a façade that conceals our innermost thoughts.

For me, painting functions as a façade in all the ways discussed above. Painting encapsulates the complicated, beautiful chaos of life; of family dynamics, tension, strength, contradictions, amusement, celebration, festivities, comforts of the everyday and heartbreak. This is what is embedded within the layers of paint, however what the surface of the painting exhibits, for me, is very different. Bold, bright colours exude a playful energy like a burst of confetti, but can quickly turn into a muddy, sloppy mess. The scale of the surfaces or installation looms over allowing the viewer to become overwhelmed and lost within the materials, but can also be disassembled into simple, mundane materials - wood and canvas. The contrasting textures are layered overtop one another and lead the eye to specific areas within the composition, distracting from weaker parts of the painting and picking and choosing what is revealed/concealed. The surface of the painting gives this illusion of space and depth, allowing us, for a moment, to live in our imagination. For a moment, allowing us to be free, to forget things about our lives or maybe to remember, reflect and process. The façade is an ideal, but it is empty, it is a mask that can be taken off and a painting that can be taken down.

How do you deal with doubt and lack of confidence in the studio? When you are on empty, what fills you up in the studio?

When I'm unsure or overwhelmed in the studio I spend time sketching. Sometimes I sketch for days or weeks before I start painting, or even enter the studio. Changing my surroundings helps too, and sketching digitally is very portable which makes it easy to move around. It also allows me to 'toggle' between ideas/options and experiment with many different possibilities quickly - that helps wrap my head around composition and scale.

Other times I will start small - I'll get a small piece of paper or wood panel and just start mark making, this loosens up my hand. Working on multiple small pieces at the same time is also another way I tackle feeling stuck. There's something about working at a small scale, being really close to the surface and often hunched over the piece, working flat on a table that is comforting. I'm not moving around massive panels or climbing ladders and having to step back several feet to even see what is going on in the composition. It feels intimate, like looking through a microscope, sewing (which I'm terrible at), reading, writing or baking. In some ways, there's more spontaneity in my smaller works, I often don't sketch for them at all and they

develop over a longer periods of time. Once some small works are underway, ideas are flowing and I gain confidence.

To keep myself going in the studio I usually listen to a podcast, typically comedy podcasts, or I'll put on some music. I listen to a wide range of music but especially this time of year when it is really grey, cloudy and rainy in Vancouver, 90s/2000s hip-hop/rap/R&B/pop/and alternative rock, definitely helps lift my mood. Other times I'll play a movie or tv show in the background, something I've seen a million times so I don't really have to pay attention. Harry Potter movies used to be my go-to, but I found no matter how many times I watch the movies I'm eventually glued to the TV screen. All the sudden there is no painting happening and I'm just fully sitting there watching the movie. Lots of natural light, lighting an incense stick or having snacks handy also helps. If I'm really dragging my feet I'll stop and leave the studio before I make a mistake, I take a break for the day or longer, get my mind off of things (I overthink a lot).

Are you an introvert or an extrovert?

Honestly, both. I love socializing, talking to people I know and don't know, striking up random conversations with strangers. I enjoy large gatherings, and crowds the energy of those spaces is exciting to me. More recently (and also because it's winter), I prefer being around close friends and family in more intimate settings like at home, a restaurant or coffee shop. I also really need time by myself, I love time by myself to recharge especially if there has been lots of socializing happening. Often times I'll need a few days to recharge, but even on a daily basis having at least an hour to myself is important. Having time alone is key to my creative process.

How important is your identity as an artist of South Asian background to identifying and understanding your work?

My identity as an artist of South Asian, Punjabi background has had a big impact on my work and comes through in my use of colour, scale, texture, surface, process, and my inclination towards abstraction. My cultural identity is one aspect of my identity as an artist that is important to understanding my practice. Reflecting on my early exposure to creative forms of making or thinking, much is the result of my Punjabi heritage.

My parents had an arranged marriage and were married quite young, they never had the opportunity to complete an education or even figure out who they were or what they wanted

from life. As a result, much of their decision making was spontaneous - often figuring things out as they were going through it; willing to take risks. Observing how they move through life, it's very much like a collage - pulling from various, disconnected sources; seeking advice from a wide range of people, going with their gut, different streams of income, high highs and low lows, and pulling from their own polarized life experiences. Taking all of these pieces, jamming them together hoping it clicks in like a puzzle, but inevitably having to figure out how to fill in the gaps. A collaged approach to making always feels unnerving to me, as if the work can begin to unravel at any point - but this approach to painting is what excites me, there is a spontaneity to the modular nature of my surfaces. It feels unstable, just when I think I've figured it out, things can shift at any time.

Further, the spectacle of Indian wedding festivities has impacted how I approach my materials and surfaces. *Rangolis* - which are colourful patterns or mandalas created on the floor using sand, flower petals, rice flour, and coloured powders - have always captivated me. A rangoli symbolizes good luck, prosperity, and is used to welcome guests. I've also been inspired by the application of *mehndi* or henna to guests hands, taken by the concept of a monochrome, green paste squeezed out of a tube to create ornate, intricate patterns, staining my hands with a very deep red orange colour. It altered the surface of my hand, but only temporarily, disappearing completely in about a week. These early cultural influences are referenced in the ways in which I apply paint to my surface. Often times, I mix materials such as coloured sand, rice flour, dried flower petal paste, sawdust and soil into my paint. The mixture is applied with a brush, sponge, rag, palette knife or squeezed out of a piping bag. I'm interested in bringing these materials and methods that are inspired by my cultural identity into my work while also utilizing abstraction as a way to interpret them so it is embedded within the work, versus sitting on the surface of my paintings.

Watching my grandmother and my mom cook in the kitchen was awe-inspiring. They would take such ordinary ingredients and transform them into dishes that would make your mouth water and tastebuds sing. My favourite part about watching them was the fact that they never used cookbooks or followed any rules, they eyeballed everything and relied on taste and feel to know that the food is done. Of course, this lead to the food tasting a little different every time, but still delicious. This confidence and handling of materials extends to my painting process. I'm not really one for paying attention to minute details, and I typically don't follow conventional rules for painting. For example, applying thin coats of gesso, sanding each layer in between to prime the surface, using clean tools for scooping paint out of containers (my titanium white has a little bit of every colour in it), the order in which I apply different types of paint is all over the

place and I have no methods of mixing a specific paint colour - most of my process is trying to achieve the right feeling, which if need be, is hard to replicate so I rarely (never) achieve the same colour twice.

As the eldest daughter in a Punjabi household, there is the weight of responsibilities to others and expectations, while also trying to focus on yourself (which often leads to feelings of guilt). It tends to be difficult to speak up without fear of how it might be received, especially when you are expected to simply obey without asking questions. There are strong emotions that are suppressed, waiting to be released. Figuring out how to express yourself in a way that doesn't get you in trouble tends to lead to passive aggressive behaviour. Body language, facial expression and tone of voice says it all without really *saying* anything. It is an aggressive, indirect form of communication that allows you to express yourself in a way that isn't clear. Which for me, is what abstraction is - it is a way to say something without really saying it. Just because a painting is made using bright, vibrant, candy like colours - which for many reasons our brain is trained to recognize as happy and joyful - isn't necessarily what those colours are saying. Within my paintings I use highly contrasting colours that push up against each other, my surfaces hold textures that are layered on top of one another but are vastly different, individual panels within the composition being forced together - there is tension in the painting. Just because someone smiles, doesn't mean they're happy.

For me, abstraction means to think for yourself. No one is telling me what to see or how to see it, and it can be whatever I'd like it to be. The work isn't telling the viewer what to see, you don't have to simply obey, it's an opportunity for everyone to create their very own narrative.

Our cultural identities are quite complex and layered, and though it has greatly influenced my practice, it doesn't represent my entire identity as a person. There are many other facets to identity that have impacted my work, beyond my South Asian roots. Our identities are more than what one can see when looking at the surface, there are many invisible aspects of our identities that greatly impact the ways in which we move through the world. To name a few of my own: my experiences as a student studying biology, lifeguarding, fashion/textile/surface designer, my move from Brampton, ON to Richmond, BC, tv shows and movies I grew up watching, my fears, the ways in which I process emotions are all aspects of my identity you cannot see - the invisible. All are important aspects that come through in my work and my process - the visible. The use of colour and line, impulse to make loud, large work while also drawing attention to small details, encouraging slow viewing, stem from both my cultural and other life experiences. Yes, my cultural identity is important to understanding my work, but it

isn't the only way I would like the work to be read. I would also like my work to be an experience of colour, scale and texture. Hopefully there is something within the work that everyone can relate to; becoming an opportunity to bring people together and open up a range of conversations.

I have always thought that as an artist, if you can travel freely in your head, changing locations is not inherently necessary. You travel a lot and do residencies. How does this help you as an artist?

Travelling and exploring things locally is key to my creative process. It gives me a chance to distance myself physically and mentally from how I normally do things; my routine, how I move through certain spaces and my thought processes. There is a lot of value to that, changing your setting to encourage curiosity. Travelling domestically, locally and internationally is so rich with visual information. I love staring out of windows of moving vehicles - cars, ferries, trains, buses, planes - everything is so fleeting, and you see things from so many different perspectives. It helps gain a better understanding of what it is that I'm looking at. The experience of seeing a car beside you on the road is very different than seeing traffic operate from 15,000 ft. in the air, walking down the street is different than passing it by on the bus, going by the mountains on a skytrain is different than floating in between them on a ferry. Through these experiences I gain perspective which shapes the way I wrap my head around big things, concepts, and surfaces. When travelling, I enjoy immersing myself within the local community - talking to the locals, visiting historic sites, eating food, watching sporting events, going to fairs and festivals, the sites, smells, colours and textures are so inspiring. Speaking to people I wouldn't normally be around in my day to day routine is such a great way to learn and grow as an artist.

Attending residencies has been a way for me to meet other artists and hear their stories - it is exciting to talk to others and learn about how they found their way to art making. It is also interesting to observe how different artists work unfolds, to see their process. It has also been a helpful way to meet curators and writers outside of my local art community, which has opened up a few doors for my career as well.

Can you talk about process – about how you conceive the installation that takes over a space and how it relates to the space of individual paintings? Do you make adjustments during the process? What is the ratio of planning/spontaneity in your process?

The process for the site specific installations begins by seeing the space, either through images, video, or blueprints, but ideally having the opportunity to walk through and spend some time in it. This is helpful visual and spacial information to have when creating paintings for the show or considering where existing works could be placed. Further, it gives me the chance to brainstorm how the paintings can potentially extend onto the walls and engage with the specific architecture of the space. I like the idea of a painting being able to stretch and really take over a space. Within my painting practice I experiment with surface by combining materials like textiles, paper, wood panels, and traditional canvas within the same composition. Many of my paintings are created using multiple panels that, when combined and installed together, create larger scale compositions. They come together like pieces of a puzzle which, during the process, shift, grow, shrink, individual panels of the painting are sometimes swapped out or turned upside down - there is a strong sense of play throughout the process. The paintings feel spontaneous and free, and less permanent and restricted. Painting is not perfect, nor is life. There was a time when I was obsessed with being perfect, having everything around me be perfect and everyone happy - and if everyone wasn't happy, I had to fix it. In many ways painting has provided me with a space to process these aspects of my life - giving up control and thinking through painting. There have been times, for example, when there is conflict within a relationship, and it feels as if a situation will never change or a specific person will never change. Gaps and cracks form within the relationship that weren't there before and I can try my best to try and mend them or fill them in, but sometimes no matter how much effort is put in it simply can't be fixed. Similarly, with the multi-panelled paintings, there are areas within the composition where the panels may not line up because the panels may not be perfectly square, or perhaps the wall upon which the paintings are installed isn't completely level, there are gaps between the panels of the painting. This is a result of creating a painting using this method, and a lesson of giving up some control over the process. Sometimes I just have to let things, people or the painting be.

Circumstances in life shift often, one might be on a certain path in life and commit to staying on that path even if it isn't working. However, if there is an openness to veering off the path opportunities might present themselves and provide a change for the better, but that won't become apparent until that step off the path is taken. A painting might be created in a very specific way, following a sketch and executing a plan. Naturally, along the way I might start to

realize that things aren't going the way I hoped they would - instead of being attached to the initial sketch, I may start to shift the individual panels which lead to exciting possibilities that were not there before - and wouldn't be if I was too worried or unsure to take the step to make the change, or not accepting that things don't have to go according to plan.

I see the walls in a gallery space as another opportunity for the painting to continue to grow. The paintings, once on a wall, respond to the space and vice versa, the space changes as paintings are installed. They influence each other, the experience of walking through the space and viewing the painting. The same painting can be shown in multiple spaces and the way in which the painting extends on the wall will change, responding to the space in a different way. It's very similar to how I move through life, as my surroundings change, I grow and adapt. It becomes a part of my story.

Most of the time adjustments are made to the site specific wall extensions. By looking at a small digital sketch, I can't really get a sense of scale or how the space is going to feel. It's expected that things will change once the walls start getting painted and the works are installed. So I would say for the most part there is a plan, and at times the plan is executed pretty closely, but there is always change and spontaneous decision making.

Your work, like mine, consists of multiple layers of information and colour. Could you talk about the layering process both technically and within the content?

Layering is so compelling to me, discovering layers, peeling them back - one layer building upon another; nothing existing on its own as a single layer, but always being apart of something else or an unravelling. I've always been drawn to looking at cross sections - the view of what the inside of something looks like. Learning about layers of rock, the diagram from my middle school textbook is still burned in my mind, it is so fascinating to see the passage of time captured within the layers. Observing the cross sections of leaves, other plants and organisms that I dissected in my plant biology and zoology labs, or watching the Food Network's Anna Olson cutting the perfect slice of cake and seeing all of the distinct, delicious layers - the element of surprise and realizing that what you see on the surface is just one view. There is so much more underneath and within that can reveal information and provide a better understanding about how something works. Also, thinking about the layers of generations within my family, and that in order for me to be here - living and pursuing the things that I want to do with my life - is a result of a build up of many people before me, over time, making sacrifices, mistakes and succeeding. I feel a strong sense of responsibility to achieve the goals

I have set for myself because there were so many that came before me that didn't have the opportunity to do so.

Layering is an important part of my painting process. I start with small, flat, digital sketches. When the painting process begins, I aim to distance the work from this graphic, flat sketch. The first step is to prime my surface, I'm not super technical when it comes to applying gesso to a surface, it is typically applied very gesturally. Often incorporated into the second coat of gesso are materials like sand or sawdust to give the primer texture so I'm not starting by working on such a smooth, 'perfect' surface. Next, using pastel, I draw my sketch on to the surface with the aid of a projector. If I'm not working with a sketch, I start mark making or applying blocks of colour to the surface. From that point forward, my materials and paint become thicker by incorporating cut fabrics, mediums (molding paste, fibre paste, heavy body gel medium, etc.) and by mixing materials such as sand, rice, soil, sawdust, dried flower petals, and paper pulp to my paint. Acrylic paint is my main medium and, used on its own, dries pretty flat. So mixing various materials into it allows the paint to hold some body/volume and, when it is dry, creates a sort of cast of my gesture. Using either a brush, palette knife, sponge, rag, piping bag or at times my hands the paint is applied to a surface.

What advice would you give an emerging artist?

This is a tricky one because what has worked for me so far may not for others, everyone's trajectory will be very different. But I would say one of the most important things is to be disciplined. Not much will happen for your career if you're not making anything or setting some time aside for studio work. Creating a routine for yourself - I knew I didn't want to have the same routine day in and out, but I think it is a bit of a slippery slope not having any routine at all, so maybe creating a routine with some wiggle room for spontaneity is good. Just something that keeps you in check and accountable because you are your own boss, no one will tell you to get it together, you kind of have to do that for yourself. It's really important for me to have a morning ritual that sets the tone for my day and gets me in the right headspace.

Set deadlines for yourself, try your best to always be making something, keep your hands moving, place yourself in creative and inspiring environments - whatever that may look like for you. When you are feeling low or discouraged be in tune with what gets you out of those slumps. If your goal is to make a living from your work ensure you have some other sources of reliable income that can help you while you're on your way towards becoming a full time artist. That definitely helps relieve some stress and will allow you to be more creative in the studio.